

## IF9 -- Hospitality: recognising the good in us all

Many years ago, when I first felt the call to ordained ministry in the Methodist church, a Parsi/Zoroastrian friend asked me what sort of training would be required of me, and whether that training would include studying all the ‘harm’ done by the Christian church over the centuries. The good part of that conversation was that she felt confident enough in our relationship to ask me. The difficult part was seeing ‘my’ church through her eyes and recognising again that we Christians have not always lived up to our high calling to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Indeed, in our own minds, we Methodists like to think of ourselves as the kind of Christians who welcome everyone. And yet, our historic roots have not always confirmed that hospitality, that welcoming of difference. Perhaps this is part and parcel of the human condition: valuing our own safety and security above that of others.

Through the ages, much of our human ‘security’ has been based on recognising who was like us and who was different. That recognition allowed us to stay ‘safe’ within the bounds of those within our own community, but it also assumed that anyone or anything that was different was a threat. In the earliest (pre-historic) days, human social groups were often small or at least local: as far as one could walk in a day usually determined the extent of the safety zone; to go further than a day’s journey meant staying overnight. The vulnerability of sleep involved a level of trust that required careful planning and diligence. Most often it involved sticking with one’s own group and its beliefs and practices.

As we humans learned to travel better, we inevitably learned to interact better with those who were from other groups. In many cultures, hospitality became a prized virtue: the position of ‘host’ indicated a certain stature of maturity that enabled one to offer temporary security to a stranger. We remember the ancient stories of Abraham and Sarah offering up hospitality in the desert to the three traveling strangers. ‘A cup of cold water’ has become a Christian byword in welcome, while in Hinduism, the concept of welcoming the Other is equivalent to welcoming God. I remember spending the night with my husband on a houseboat on Srinagar Lake in Kashmir owned by a Muslim man who was delighted to tell us over breakfast how Allah had blessed him and his wife with daughters and food and the boat and the lake and the guests! His hospitality included sharing his home, his food, his prayers with us. We were mutually blessed.

Though we humans have had millennia to learn these lessons of caring and sharing that can result in mutual thriving, we still fall back into old patterns of mistrust when we encounter people who have grown up (or adopted) in diverse cultures. London, for instance, is one of the most diverse cities in the world where there are abundant opportunities to learn about each other; our commonalities and our differences. And yet we have learned new ways to keep our space: when I moved to London, I soon learned to avoid making eye contact on the tube, much less smile at others! This was in direct contrast to the small towns where I had lived and ‘everybody knew everybody.’ Not knowing puts us on our guard.

It happens with religion as well. Few of us are eager or willing to offer hospitality to those of other faiths or get respond positively to invitations from others; in my experience, ‘interfaith services’ are often poorly attended. Is it that we don’t think we have anything to gain from the ‘other’?

There are times, of course, when hospitality offered – or received -- has been abused, and we have learned to be more cautious and suspicious in our welcome or our response. The conversation I mentioned earlier with my Parsi friend reminds me of the severe persecution the Zoroastrians experienced from Muslims and Jews *AND* Christians they had welcomed into their homeland of Iran over the years. Eventually they were driven from their homeland by the persecution; their hospitality was met with hostility. In time, they were finally welcomed into India by Hindus, and slowly they learned to trust again.

The move between hospitality and hostility can go both ways. One of the challenges of interfaith dialogue is to open up hostile spaces and make them hospitable again. Most often this starts by recognising our similarities: our need to each know we are safe and secure, that physical needs and our beliefs will be respected. We begin to recognise again that all of us are searching for meaning in our living and dying: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What have we learned about who God is and what God requires of us?

In my first article in this series, I quoted from the Methodist document, 'Called to Love and Praise,' which encouraged us to seek out opportunities "for engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths." Perhaps this is the contemporary equivalent of being a 'good host': feeling secure enough in our own 'house', our own faith, that we can offer secure space to rest and interact with us and our faith, for the good of us all.